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DMSTTIAC PR 98-02

Special Operations Forces: Looking Forward

by

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Commander, U.S. Special Operation Command

A Review by

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June 1998

19990604 026

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REVIEW

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This article was published in Defense 97, issue 3, which is a publication of the Department of Defense (DoD) to provide official and professional information to commanders and key personnel on matters related to defense policies and interests and to create better understanding and teamwork within DoD.

The article introduces the United States as the sole superpower. As such the U.S. is obligated to assist other countries in need or threatened by adversaries, as long as it's in our national interests. Future U.S. military involvement will not necessarily be driven by what our armed forces perceive to be a threat to our national security or interest, but how American society at large and our elected officials view threats, determine our national interests and how we wage war as a nation.

Special operations forces today are global, joint and versatile. They operate world wide, with little fanfare, often in parts of the world where disease, poverty and civil strife riddle the countryside. They serve in extremely harsh, as well as permissive, environments, under the cover of darkness and increasingly, in the high-tech realm of cyberspace. They can operate as a cohesive joint service team or as a single service unit. A hallmark is frequent operations with coalition forces and other foreign militaries. Special operations forces support conventional forces in major conflicts, and they respond to conflicts or crises such as insurgencies, subversion, sabotage, narcotics trafficking and terrorism. They are not structured or expected to win wars single-handedly, but they can help prevent and deter them. As part of a theater joint task force, they can enable conventional forces to achieve victory.

By anticipating changes in world development, analyzing our special operations force employment trends and examining American societal and cultural trends, will help prepare special operations forces for the future. Also in preparing for the future means considering what DoD's expectations will be for the use and role of special operations forces.

General Shelton expects we will need special operations forces more than ever in traditional roles, but they must also prepare for nontraditional environments and more sophisticated threats. Special operation forces have a long history of responding to

threats to our nation during war and to various crises and conflicts during peace. They have demonstrated affordability, versatility, capability, and readiness. They are tailored to meet the challenges of today's uncertain, dynamic world.

General Shelton goes on to claim the U.S. Special Operations Command as providing DoD's only standing joint service force - an aspect that will be key to meeting the increased "jointness" requirements in Joint Vision 2010.

High quality people, innovative leadership, versatile forces, jointness and adaptability are terms the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff uses in Joint Vision 2010 to describe the characteristics of future U.S. armed forces. These same terms aptly describe special operations forces of today. Based on the chairman's vision and observable trends, special operations forces will have a significant role in the more unpredictable, less stable future security environment.

A constant challenge for special operations forces is to maintain a high state of readiness and flexibility in an era of diminished resources and increasing noncombat contingencies. For the next decade, we can expect contingencies and operations short of war to dominate our national security environment, and we must plan accordingly. In such an environment, special operations forces will likely continue to be a key player in U.S. preventive defense - peacetime engagements to detect and resolve crises and create conditions that support peace.

The article predicts our nation, in the future, will face new challenges, new dangers, diverse threats and potential adversaries more willing to use insidious means to achieve their goals. A 1995 DoD study ascertained the "next century adversary will aggressively use offensive information operations, rely on underground and covert urban facilities, and have some ability to attack low-earth orbiting satellites. It will allocate 20 percent of its budget on a 'revolution in military affairs' achieved through enhanced surveillance capabilities, weapons of mass destruction, thousands of inexpensive missiles, a few very low observable cruise missiles, mines and diesel submarines."

General Shelton explains "in order to prepare for the future, special operations forces need to adapt to the changing nature of warfare by challenging conventional thinking and examining new options and operational concepts for the conduct of special operations in tradition and nontraditional environments. They need to consider possible changes in doctrine, roles, missions and force structure and to examine new options and operational concepts."

He goes on to explain "special operations forces must further streamline and improve the acquisition process and be technologically provocative, adaptive and innovative. This means always being attuned to the latest domestic and foreign technological developments and capabilities. Equipment in the pipeline today or due for fielding by 2010 may be obsolete by the following decade or vulnerable to advances in countermeasures or weaponry."

Special operations forces need to anticipate future trends and scenarios involving America's national interests, values and public perceptions on the deployment and use of military forces.

The article goes into describing the threat of weapons of mass destruction falling into the hands of aggressors, terrorists, criminals or pariah states with the will and means to use them. To counter this growing threat from weapons of mass destruction, special operations forces require a dedicated intelligence apparatus and short- and long-range technology capabilities to identify, detect, track and locate nuclear materials and biological and chemical agents and precursors world-wide.

New forms of warfare will emerge in the future. Advances in information technology will primarily influence the nature of these new forms. Information may become just as crucial as ammunition. Special operations forces are ideally suited to contribute to DoD efforts and initiatives in information operations, perhaps as future global information warriors.

General Shelton ends by concluding "it important the American public and our elected officials feel equally confident in the capabilities and use of special operations forces in the future. The civilian leadership of this country must clearly define our future vital national interests and articulate the future threats to those interests to the American people. Those of us who protect and defend those interests from an increasingly wider range of threats also must participate in this process. We need to have lively, productive and intellectual debate as we look ahead, so we may move ahead the right azimuth."